

Appendix 11

A New Five-Track Employment Process

The new Five-Track Employment Process is the cornerstone of the new integrated, employment-driven service delivery system discussed in Chapter 4. The Task Force recognized that although significant numbers of veterans will continue to experience impairments, advances in medical rehabilitation, biomedical technology, and rehabilitation engineering will enable many veterans with service-connected disabilities to be employed for long periods of time after military service. The Five-Track Employment Process addresses the whole person and provides a wider array of assistance to help the disabled veteran from one end of the spectrum to the other. The Five-Track process will provide assistance for the veteran to rapidly return to a previous job, get a new job, stay on a current job, and, at the same time, become more independent in their home and community.

The Task Force concluded that a new VR&E employment program process is required to meet the needs of the 21st Century veteran:

- 1) those who require immediate employment services directed at rapid return-to-work with their previous employers or new employers,
- 2) those who require longer term services, including education, leading to employment,
- 3) those seeking self-employment, and
- 4) those for whom employment is not currently possible but who would benefit most from independent living.

The Task Force designed the new process based on data about veterans currently served by VR&E and the expected demand for services over the next 20 years. The process, properly implemented using state of the art employment readiness, job placement, employer development, and marketing methods, will lead to higher rates of employment for veterans. We conducted a broad review and examination of VR&E employment policies, programs, and operations along with best practices in other disability employment programs. This produced recommendations to:

- 1) modify current employment service tracks,
- 2) redefine and expand employment services to disabled veterans and employers,
- 3) increase employment-focused staff resources,
- 4) improve and expand collaboration both within VA and with outside organizations,
- 5) improve information technology support,
- 6) provide strengthened leadership, and
- 7) provide consistent training for all VR&E staff.

Task Force members with experience in employment services told us that employers have demonstrated that they will enthusiastically hire job-ready returning veterans to fill immediate staffing needs. The responsibility, therefore, of the VR&E is to quickly and

efficiently prepare disabled veterans and make them available to employers. In order to do this, the VR&E must build its comprehensive vocational evaluation, educational and employment services to address contemporary, real-time employment needs. In this new process, all veterans with disabilities who are ready for employment must be identified and marketed to the employer to accomplish employment outcomes. This will require differentiating the services of the program to more accurately meet employment needs. It will also require the necessary levels of staffing, appropriate support resources, and developing partnerships with employers.

The current program provides primarily one basic option for service delivery – training and education – and this option is not necessarily the most efficient or effective strategy for some types of veterans with disabilities seeking employment, especially those who need to return-to-work soon after completing military service. This is certainly the case for injured Guard and Reserve members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, many of whom left employment to serve. VR&E's 2002 figures show the predisposition to turn to training first: 23,436 rehabilitation plans were developed in 2002.

- 17,145 were in training and education
- 2,561 were in extended evaluation
- 667 were in employment services
- 3,063 were in independent living

VR&E program statistics show essentially the same breakdown in recent years. Most participants enter training (only to be interrupted or discontinued later) and only a small number go directly into employment services. The Task Force findings are in no way intended to limit the veteran's choices, including, training, but rather are intended to ensure that the training is tied to viable employment and labor market goals.

When Task Force members visited Regional offices, they learned that the workloads of current VR&E field staff are very high, that staffing levels are inadequate, and that essential functions of employment readiness, job placement, employer development, and marketing are not always being performed either adequately or in a standardized way across the country. The Task Force also found that many employment specialists were assigned multiple and varied roles that prevented them fully providing employment services. Under circumstances of increasing complexity and demand for services, the VR&E program must be significantly changed if it is to serve the needs of 21st Century disabled veterans.

Our proposed integrated employment-driven system requires major, on-going changes to the VR&E organization, program, and operations in order to provide increased efficiency and effectiveness for veterans seeking employment. The recommendations require both integrating the existing components and establishing new components to improve VR&E Services. VR&E goals will not be accomplished by implementing only selected parts of the recommendations.

The VR&E Service and the Five-Track Employment Process

To emphasize the importance of implementing the entire VR&E employment-driven system, the Task Force identified the following recommendations. The Task Force

used information on current and projected veterans with service-connected disabilities, reviewed the VR&E organization, program, and operations, and examined other Department of Veterans Affairs programs and services. The Task Force also reviewed Department of Labor veterans programs and services, Department of Defense programs and services, and current medical and vocational rehabilitation programs in the United States. We also solicited input from private sector employers who have active and effective partnerships with rehabilitation agencies. These employers include companies such as Manpower, Inc., Liberty National, and The Southern Company. The Task Force recommends that VR&E:

- Establish a new, employment-driven process that differentiates disabled veterans who need immediate employment or return-to-work from those who do not and provide services appropriate to the needs of the individual.
- Improve collaboration between VR&E and VHA, to include the establishment of specialized programs for veterans with severe and chronic impairments.
- Strengthen linkages between VR&E, VSOs, State VR programs, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, and State Employment Service Offices.
- Strengthen the coordination between VR&E, DVOPS and LVERS.
- Provide essential information technology support for VR&E staff with access to employment and employer databases.
- Revise VR&E performance standards.
- Provide strong and consistent VA, VBA, and VR&E leadership to support, execute, and maintain improvements for VR&E.

Finally, and most important, the VR&E must implement a new process that includes five program tracks providing options for disabled veterans (see Exhibit 13):

1. **Reemployment Track** will provide disabled veterans and their employers with services needed for veterans (usually National Guard and Reservists) to return to jobs they held prior to active duty.
2. **Rapid Access Employment Track** will provide assessment and rapid access to employment services to disabled veterans. This track can also be used for all types of veterans, including National Guard and Reserve veterans.
3. **Self-employment Track** will use up-to-date best practices for developing businesses and be coordinated with major federal, state, and local business development programs.
4. **Employment through Long-term Service Track** will encompass the more traditional VR&E service program with training and education and would be available for all Chapter 31 participants.
5. **Independent Living Track** will focus on outreach and specialized services to improve the quality of life for disabled veterans who qualify under federal guidelines and would encourage possible employment when appropriate.

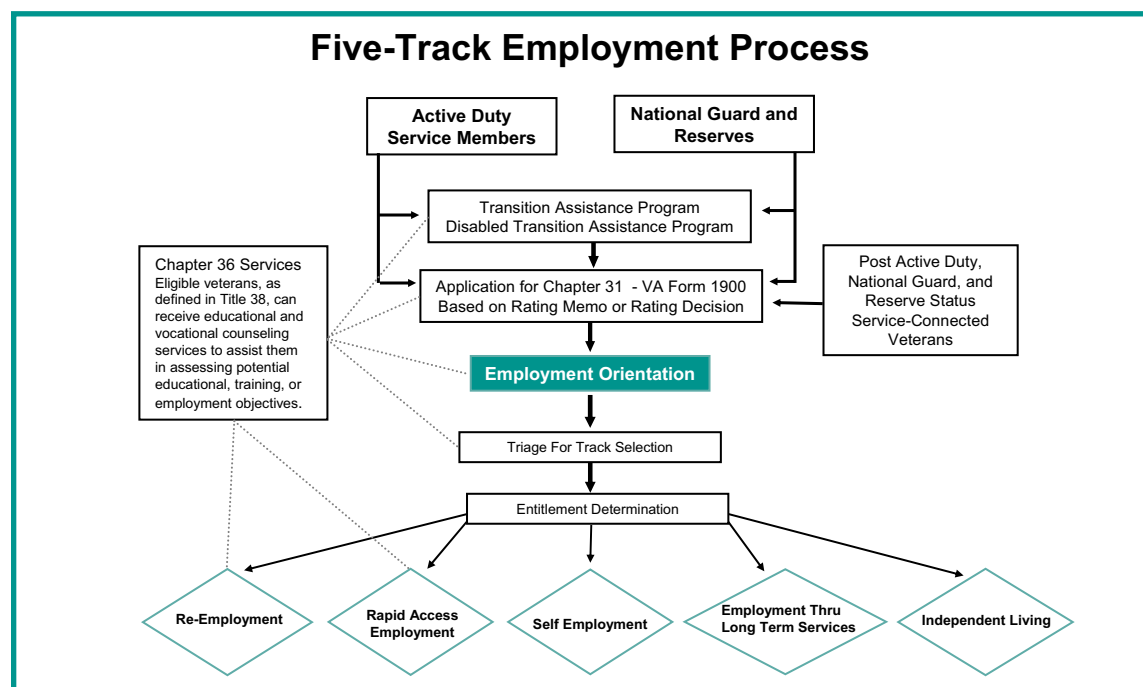


Exhibit 12

The Five-Track Employment Process will:

- Begin with VR&E Employment Orientation group sessions for veterans who have filed a Form 1900.
- Provide individualized assistance to disabled veterans after the employment orientation, for selection of the appropriate track through a triage team.

This triage team will be led by the new Employment Readiness Specialist with assistance from designated VRCs, the new Marketing and Placement Specialists, and the new Independent Living Specialist as appropriate. The focus of the triage team will be to work closely with each disabled veteran to facilitate “informed choice” by that veteran into the track which best addresses the disabled veteran’s interests, abilities and goals. VR&E Staff will need to address specific triage responsibilities and tasks in a comprehensive implantation strategy.

- Provide flexibility and allow participants to move between tracks to best prepare them for employment.
- Require that VR&E adequately staff and train for the new five-track system. The staffing would include a new classification for Employment Readiness Specialist (ERS) and would re-align the duties for the current classification of Employment Specialist (ES) to that of a Marketing and Placement Specialist to assure effective employer development and job placement for disabled veterans. It will also include a new Independent Living Specialist classification. See Appendix 12 for draft job descriptions.

Description of the Five-Tracks

Track 1 - Reemployment

This track, as depicted in Exhibit 14, is for veterans with service-connected disabilities

who have served on active military service or in the National Guard or Reserves and who are now returning to companies where they worked prior to active duty. In this track there are two critical features that must be incorporated into the VR&E process to ensure successful return-to-work: a) early intervention; and b) rapid response and delivery of needed services to maintain employment.

Implementation of Track 1 will require VR&E to change its approach. The service delivery system currently in place in the VR&E program will have to be modified for the return-to-work track because the traditional rehabilitation approach cannot be successful with previously-employed veterans. This is primarily due to the need for a more timely response and delivery of critical services to restore or maintain employment for the veteran. Oftentimes, employers do not have the expertise or resource linkages to accomplish this outcome. Specific services need to be developed and delivered to both the veteran and the employer of that veteran that focus on effective return-to-work practices that result in job retention. Specific services need to be developed and delivered to both the disabled veteran and his or her employer very soon after discharge from active military service. Services should focus on effective return to work practices that will result in job retention.

The service and process components critical to successful reemployment and job retention in this track include the following:

1. Assess Ability to Perform Essential Job Tasks

When disabled veterans return to previous employment, the first determination to be made is whether or not there are any physical or mental impairments that impact the veteran's ability to:

- access their job site;
- perform essential job tasks;
- comply with company policies and procedures.

VR&E representatives need to go beyond assessment of medical records to address the above items. This assessment must also include dialogue with, and possibly on site visits to, the veteran's employer with specific review of the following, as appropriate, based on existing impairments:

- Path of travel to work station
- Survey of work station
- Review of job description, with emphasis on essential functions

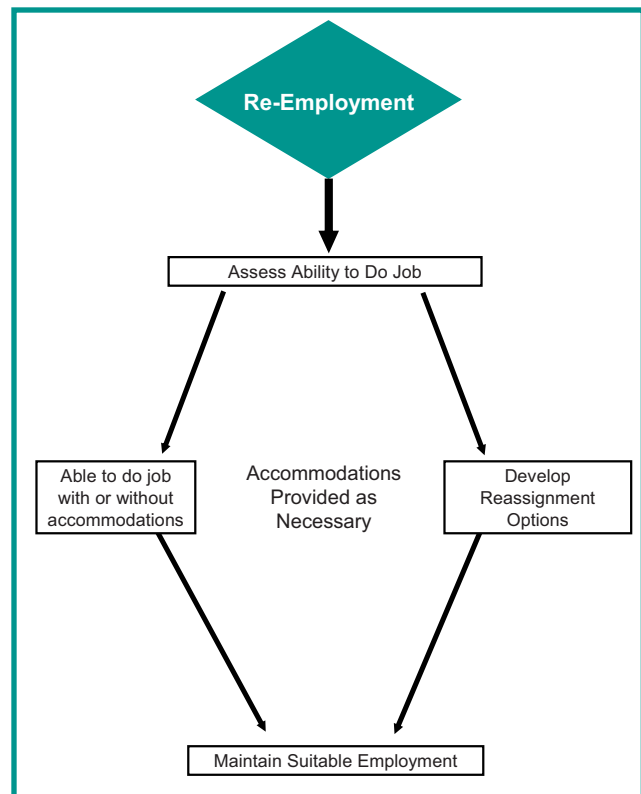


Exhibit 14

- Review of company policies and procedures where compliance is affected by veteran's physical or mental impairments

2. Determine Need for Accommodations

If job site accommodations are necessary for disabled veterans to perform essential job functions, it is critical that those accommodation options be identified for the employer as soon as possible. With the information obtained above, VR&E staff will provide the employer with this information in a timely manner and provide follow-through assistance in identification of resources, vendors, and other resources necessary to implement the purchase, use or application of the accommodation. Resources and processes identified below in "Maintain Stable Employment" apply here as well.

3. Provide Accommodations including Assistive Technology

When the need for accommodations arises, VR&E will coordinate the provision of all the necessary accommodations, to include the use of assistive technology, as is the case for all of the tracks.

4. Develop Reassignment Options If Needed

When a disabled veteran is unable to perform the essential functions of his or her job, even with the use of reasonable accommodations, or when the accommodations are deemed unreasonable, VR&E staff will work closely with the veteran, the employer, and other accommodation resource personnel in identifying options for reassignment within the same company, or with another employer, in accordance with the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Rights Act (USERRA) and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates.

5. Maintain Stable Employment

Once the disabled veteran has returned to work and is successfully performing the essential functions of the job, VR&E will conduct routine follow-up with the employer and the veteran to ensure maintenance of employment. This follow-up should address the following:

- Impact of physical or mental impairments on performance of job duties and compliance with policies
- Effectiveness of accommodations, if provided and essential to performance of job
- Quality of job performance
- Satisfaction of both veteran and employer
- Troubleshooting for any new issues that impact employment

Benefits to Veterans and Employers

The Reemployment Track allows both the veteran and company to benefit:

Services to the Veteran/Employee

- Development of a comprehensive return to work plan with employees
- Counseling and education on medical and emotional issues
- Job-site partnering to enhance productivity that might be affected by the disability and related issues
- Continuum of direct communication from initial meeting through job stabilization

- Option to transition veteran/employee to alternative vocational options if necessary because of inability to accommodate current job

Services to Employer

- Initial assessment of issues impacting return-to-work. This includes performance of job tasks, interactions with coworkers, access to guaranteed benefits and compliance with company policies & procedures
- Job task analysis when needed to identify specific performance problems
- Job demands identification to then provide corresponding research in options for reasonable accommodation
- Clarification of veteran capabilities and challenges related to medical condition
- Provision of specific accommodations (if needed)
- Development of modified or alternative duty and/or “transitional” job options in return-to-work plans to allow returning veterans the option of a time-limited job assignment while adjusting to his or her disabling condition

Benefits and Services to Health Care Providers

- Sharing of appropriate medical records (according to requirements of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)) with company personnel involved in return- to-work issues. This may include company nurse or physician, ADA or EEOC staff, immediate supervisor, or other appropriate personnel
- Customized return-to-work releases, merging specific job demands with specific work restrictions and also offering information about specific abilities.
- Rapid links to the technical experts who will provide assistive equipment
- Networking with physician offices (under HIPAA requirements) and appropriate employer representatives

Marketing to Employers

In marketing to employers, it is important that VR&E emphasize the no-cost benefits:

- Retain productive worker
- Facilitate compliance with federal mandates for returning veterans into employment previously help prior to active duty
- Minimize job-related frustration
- Reduce lost workdays after return-to-work due to early intervention and problem solving
- Provide access to technical expertise and customized accommodation options
- Provide seamless service delivery from initial return-to-work through job stabilization and long-term job retention

Outreach and Referral Services

There will be some situations when a disabled veteran returns to work without any initial barriers. Once on the job, however, the veteran may encounter barriers or may discover a disabling condition that had previously been undetected. In this case, there is a need for special outreach to alternate referral sources to assist this individual. Such outreach should be included in the comprehensive marketing done by the VR&E Marketing and Placement Specialists. These Specialists are the first point of contact for employers who contact VR&E seeking assistance with job retention issues for disabled

veterans. The outreach effort should include the following business and industry personnel:

- Human resource managers
- Company nurses or safety officers
- Company Employee Assistance Program (EAP) representatives (more likely to be aware of situations such as PTSD, addiction issues or other mental health conditions not readily apparent upon return-to-work).
- Benefits coordinators
- Payroll supervisors
- Occupational health & safety personnel
- Risk managers
- Disability insurance carriers including short-term disability, long-term disability, and workers compensation since they are the entities who provide coverage for these employees.
- Third Party Administrators managing occupational and/or non-occupational claims
- Employee's foreman or supervisor
- Employee/veteran
- Employee family member

It is important that VR&E properly train staff to deliver a return-to-work program with quality and effective solutions that meet the needs of both the veteran and the employer.

Track 2 - Rapid Access to Employment

This track, as shown in Exhibit 15, focuses on disabled veterans who have expressed a desire to seek employment soon after separation or who, in consultation with their VR Counselor, conclude that they already have the necessary skills set to qualify for competitive employment in an appropriate occupation. This decision will be made collaboratively between the disabled veteran and the "triage team." In this track the Employment Readiness Specialist (ERS) plays the primary role in direct service delivery.

After the choice for immediate employment is made, the ERS will be responsible for assisting the disabled veteran in identifying the needed resources to prepare the veteran for entry into the labor market. Employment services, which are discussed in more detail below, will include:

1. Rapid Assessment Services

Each disabled veteran seeking immediate employment will be assisted in identifying the specifics of his or her employment readiness by clarifying:

- Marketable skills
- Strengths and weaknesses
- Physical or mental impairments that may be barriers to employment and that may need to be accommodated
- Job goals (not limited to one, but to include multiple job preferences)
- Needed credentials, if any, for desired job (Note: If required credentials are missing, the veteran would temporarily leave this employment track and take advantage of the track offering the Training and Education component)

- Level of disabled veteran's motivation to obtain and maintain employment
- Specifics related to employment, such as desired wage range, date available for employment, desired shift, willingness to relocate and where, etc.

Once this information is clarified, the VRC will develop, with input from the veteran, a specific employment plan that should include the following:

- Specific actions needed to accomplish an employment outcome
- Resources needed to implement each action
- Individual(s) or organizations responsible for each action (to include the disabled veteran's responsibilities)
- Desired timelines for each action

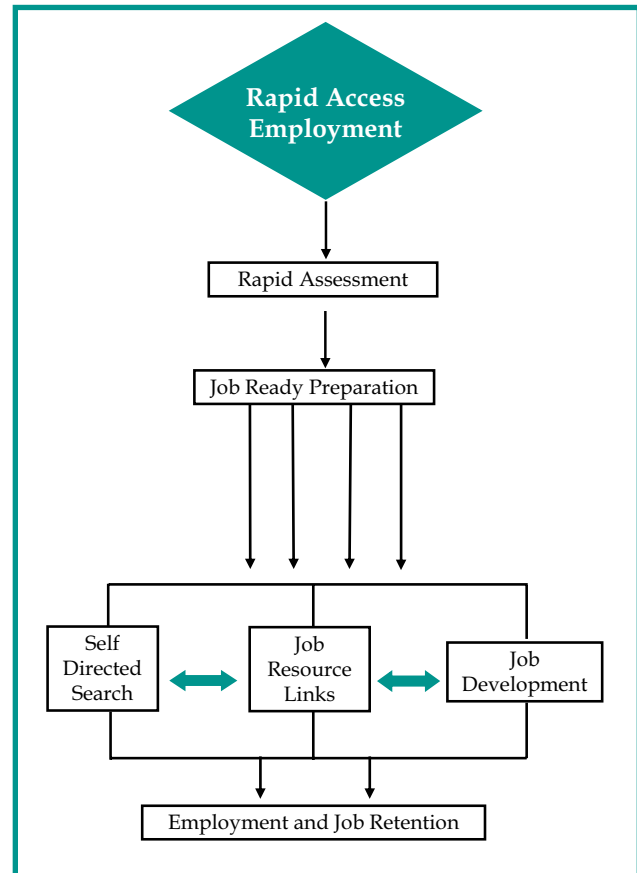


Exhibit 15

If the above information is not identifiable, the VRC has the option to move the veteran into the “Employment through Long-term Services” track for more detailed assessment.

2. Employment Readiness Preparation

All appropriate services needed to enhance the “marketability” of the disabled veteran to potential employers will be addressed in job readiness preparation and will include, but not be limited to:

- Resume preparation
- Job interview preparation
- Discussion about disclosure of disability
- Dialogue preparation for any needed accommodations

3. Self-directed Job Search or VR&E Job Development

During this phase of the employment process, the disabled veteran will have the responsibility of participating in self-directed job search and/or be offered job development assistance by VR&E staff, depending on the functional capabilities of the disabled veteran. For those with the ability to do so, self-directed job search assistance will be provided and may include the following services provided by the ERS, or other local resources arranged by the ERS:

- Registration at the local state employment service and instruction on how to use their electronic job search systems

- Training on other electronic job search internet systems
- Access to VR&E information about local labor markets and existing employer relationships developed by VR&E staff

For disabled veterans in need of VR&E job development assistance, the following services will be provided by either VR&E staff or other local resource personnel:

- Identification of actual vacancies related to the disabled veteran's job preferences
- Establishment of contacts with employers who have vacancies, identifying specifics requirements
- Marketing and referral of qualified disabled veterans to the employer
- Follow-up with the disabled veteran and the employer after referral
- Marketing of hiring incentives such as OJT reimbursement or tax credits, when appropriate, to the employer

4. Linkage to Employment Resources

In the delivery of services in this "Rapid Access to Employment" track, the VR&E Officer will be expected to provide the VRCs with the necessary resources to accomplish the desired employment outcome. Those resources will include, but not be limited to, the following:

- VR&E Employment Readiness Specialist
- Marketing and Placement Specialist
- State DOL (DVOP)
- State Vocational Rehabilitation Services
- One-Stop Career Centers
- VR&E Job Labs or Job Clubs
- America's Job Bank and VR&E's Enhanced Online Employment Services, as described in Chapter 6 and Appendix 11.
- Job Readiness Materials such as resume writing software, Internet-linked computers for use in job labs, etc.
- Other locally available resources

5. Provision of Job Accommodation Services

For disabled veterans whose physical or mental impairments are such that they present a barrier to employment and/or the performance of essential job tasks, the VR&E will:

- Specifically identify each barrier
- Utilize available resources to determine reasonable accommodations that will minimize or remove the barriers. These resources may include the human factors engineers at the Job Accommodation Network, technology specialists available through the state vocational rehabilitation programs, or other local resources.
- Identify and provide, as needed, assistive technology
- Arrange for the purchase, delivery, set-up, and effective use of the accommodation at the job site
- Routinely follow-up with the employer and the employed veteran after hire to ensure the effectiveness of the accommodation.

6. *Employment*

It is expected that the outcome of this track will be the successful competitive employment of disabled veterans.

7. *Post-Employment Follow-up and Evaluation*

In order to ensure that disabled veterans successfully retain their jobs, formalized follow-up services after he or she is on the job is expected. These services will include, at the very least, telephone contact with the veteran (and the employer, if there was direct involvement with that employer by VR&E staff or their representative). This follow up will address issues such as level of satisfaction by veteran and employer and troubleshooting to address any issues that might threaten continued employment.

With the new VR&E Employment Readiness Specialists functioning full time and helping to set up a network of parallel service providers, a number of quality outcomes can be expected in the implementation of the rapid access track. This new approach will:

- Provide the Marketing and Placement Specialists with specific job candidates to be marketed to employer contacts as opposed to the generic “Hire A Vet” theme without identification of specific veterans who are available to go to work. This approach is much preferred by employers because they get with job-ready candidates.
- Provide employers with an “employment-ready” pool of competitive candidates for job vacancies in their companies.
- Present the veteran in the most “favorable” light to the employer.
- Ensure that employment readiness services will not be short-changed when there are excessively large VRC caseloads and/or territories.

In addition, the new approach should significantly improve the disabled veteran satisfaction survey ratings in the Job Ready Status, increase the number of disabled veterans entering the “employed status” at closure, and provide VR&E staff with a continually growing number of employers who wish to hire additional disabled veterans because of their satisfaction with “first hires” from the program (i.e. repeat business—a critical component of an effective employment program)

Involve Partners and Stakeholders

The Veterans Service Organizations, through more active partnership with VR&E, could make significant contributions to increasing employment opportunities for disabled veterans. Many of their constituents may either be employers themselves or work in organizations that might be amenable to hiring well-trained disabled veterans. VSO members may also have valuable business contacts that if shared with VR&E could result in employment opportunities for disabled veterans.

However, it appears that some VSO members have little understanding of, or pay much attention to, the employment focus of the VR&E Program. VR&E is too often viewed as a G. I. Bill Program for disabled veterans. Educational training may be considered to be the goal of veterans participating in a VR&E Program.

In the regularly scheduled quarterly briefings/meetings with VSOs, the VR&E Officers should include discussion of specific issues related to employment. These meetings will

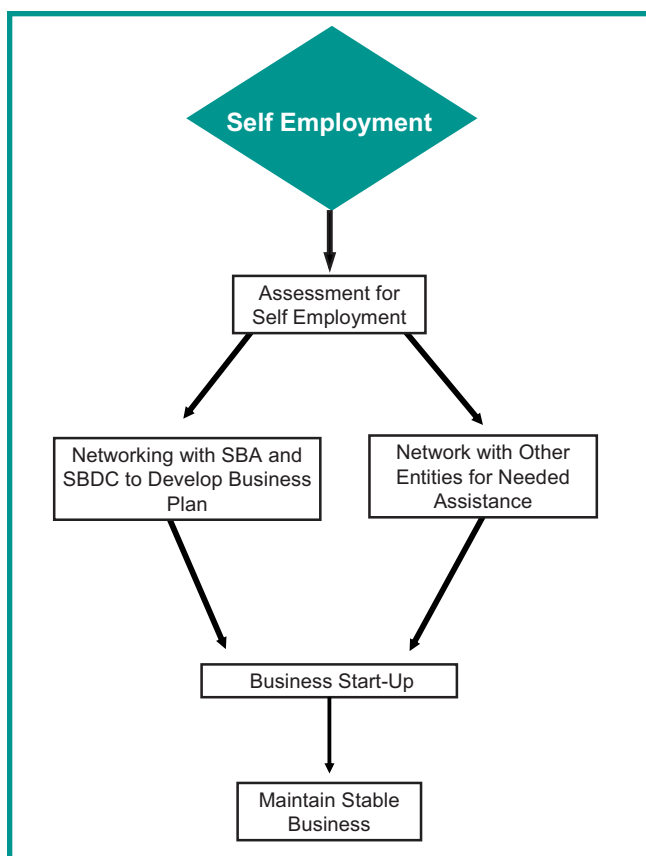


Exhibit 16

provide VR&E with a forum to discuss the latest trends, policies, procedures, and legislative activities in VR&E and the potential impact on disabled veterans. VR&E will also have an opportunity to solicit advice and counsel on increasing employers' awareness of the VR&E Program and on expanding employment opportunities for disabled veterans.

The Marketing and Placement Specialist should generate activities that increase the awareness and involvement of VSOs in the employment of disabled veterans. The MPS should:

- Work collaboratively with VSOs in the recognition of employers who have hired veterans with disabilities.

- Set up interactive sessions between VSOs and employers.
- Encourage VSOs to link their websites to the VR&E website and promote the program.

The Director of VR&E should continue to schedule regular meetings (at least quarterly) with the leadership of the VSOs to discuss the latest trends, policies, procedures and legislative activities in vocational rehabilitation and the potential impact on disabled veterans. However, these meetings should include specific issues relating to employment in order to strengthen the focus on this outcome. This effort should also continue to be replicated at the regional and local offices.

Further, VR&E staff should become a member of the rapidly growing initiative to develop a national employment network with employers throughout the country who wish to actively recruit people with disabilities into their workplace through CSAVR, RSA and other organizations. State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies are currently attempting to respond to nationally-based employers who want to leverage partnerships with VR nationally in order to generate referrals of qualified candidates with disabilities. Such employers are becoming more and more aware of the fact that the labor market is shrinking and that outreach to non-traditional groups of job candidates is smart business. State VR does not presume to be able to meet all the employment needs of such employers. It would seem prudent to include disabled veterans in the mix of job candidates identified in the development of this national network.

Likewise, Marketing and Placement Specialists should initiate outreach to new or existing Business Leadership Networks (BLN) that are currently being formed or are in a growth phase, state by state, to offer the VR&E program as a source for recruiting veterans with disabilities. During the past 5 years employers throughout the country have begun to come together to form working liaisons amongst themselves to address issues specific to disability in the workplace and to share best practices. These networks have grown consistently and many are already affiliated with state VR agencies that provide “behind the scenes” technical assistance, which includes recruiting of job candidates with disabilities. The US BLN movement is also growing and attempting to better organize state chapters with a national mission and strategic plan. Annually these employers conduct a “BLN Summit” to address the issues.

VR&E Officers should also make direct contact with directors of the state Employment Service offices to negotiate unrestricted access by the Marketing and Placement Specialists to the state’s AWS (America’s Workforce System) database. This access would give designated VR&E staff comprehensive information on all listed job vacancies, as well as the opportunity to “direct-refer” qualified and pre-screened disabled veterans.

- Access to this system must be seriously respected and designated VR&E users must place a top priority of pre-screening referrals to these jobs.
- Users of the system must be trained by the state employment service staff and given special access codes and request the option to have the system access available on their desktop computers
- Users of the system must ensure that they will do data entry into the AWS system to provide production updates on referrals and hires.

Thousands of employers post their job vacancies within state employment office AWS systems that feed into America’s Job Bank. Access to the “unsuppressed” portion of this system (giving company names for jobs posted, along with the option to do direct candidate referral) is carefully guarded because of employer preference and in order to properly manage the information.

Giving selected VR&E unsuppressed access to the AWS creates a win-win for everyone. More of the job vacancies posted at the employment service could be filled. More disabled veterans could be referred to these job vacancies by VR&E staff who are better able to market those veterans to employers.

Stress Employment Goal with Veterans

VR&E staff must ensure veterans understand that the primary goal of the VR&E Program is employment and encourage their motivation towards obtaining employment throughout their rehabilitation program.

- Explain the different employment tracks and assist disabled veterans in making informed choices about the most appropriate track to meet their needs. .
- Develop realistic goals based upon vocational assessment, career exploration and counseling, and labor market data prior to beginning a rehabilitation plan.
- Justify training (educational or short-term) with career requirement data.

- Keep veterans focused on employment throughout the rehabilitation process by engaging veterans in assignments related to employment research such as labor market data gathering, draft of resume, and informational interviews with real employers.
- Initiate job readiness and job club activities and interventions with veterans earlier in their rehabilitation programs. These services will now be more readily available in the newly established Rapid Access to Employment track.

Unsuccessful program closures can occur for a variety of reasons. Many times the motivational levels of VR&E disabled veteran consumers to return to work or to obtain employment is or can become significantly low. Lack of motivation will deter or prevent a positive employment outcome both for the veteran and for the VR&E Program. Waiting to confront lack of motivation until the veteran is referred to employers or asked to participate in self-directed job seeking activities may prove to be too late. Consequently, motivational issues need to be addressed early on and throughout the rehabilitation process. Revising the veteran's strategy to obtain employment or switching service delivery tracks may assist in boosting the veteran's motivation.

Track 3 - Self-Employment

Services provided in this track will include critical components to ensure delivery of quality services to disabled veterans who have both the interest and the aptitude to pursue self-employment (see Exhibit 16):

1. Network with the Small Business Administration and Small Business Development Centers

The SBA and SBDCs have the expertise to assist VR&E staff in:

- assessing the capability of persons interested in starting their own business;
- guiding the disabled veteran in the development of a feasible business plan;
- linking the disabled veteran to financial resources.

These organizations should be the primary resource used by VR&E staff when disabled veterans choose self employment.

2. Network with Other Entities

There are several other entities that provide assistance to individuals with start up businesses. VR&E staff would be expected to work with organizations such as SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives), the 8a Status (access to non-competitive contracts with the federal government), and lender organizations. In addition, develop or update strategic partnerships with Rehabilitation Services Administration, VA's Center for Veteran's Enterprises, Department of Labor's Office of Disability and Employment Policy, and government Offices of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization.

3. Business Start-Up

The VR&E staff will monitor the implementation of the disabled veteran's business plan on a regular basis. This will include identification of needed accommodations or additional resource links.

4. Maintain Stable "Employment"

The first year of a new business is the most critical in the determination of the

success of the business. Consequently, VR&E staff will continue to provide needed rehabilitation services and support throughout this first year in order to ensure stable “employment.” VR&E staff may not be considering self-employment as a viable employment option on a consistent basis. In some cases, self employment can be considered for disabled veterans who have limited access to employment, need flexible work schedules, or who need a more accommodating work environment than is normally achievable in traditional work places. Research demonstrates that well-planned and properly resourced businesses are a reasonable option for persons with disabilities. Further, changing business needs increase opportunities for self-employment.

The VR&E Task Force recommends that VR&E develop and implement a self-employment initiative that incorporates the following activities:

- Survey VR&E staff to determine current activities regarding self-employment services.
- Follow progress of self-employed veterans to identify best practices and opportunities to improve service.
- Review existing literature and program experience to identify best practices.
- Clarify VR&E policy on developing self-employment programs.
- Provide state of the art training in best practices to VR&E staff.
- Establish pilot resource centers to support VR&E staff in the development of self-employment services and to serve as a model for identifying and exporting best practices.
- Develop a resource guide to assist staff in self-employment planning.
- Conduct an outcome study to measure the long-term impact of self-employment.

Track 4 - Employment Through Long-term Services

When employment is more of a long-term goal, the disabled veteran will follow the more traditional route of training and education. The major components of this track, as shown in Exhibit 17, will include the following:

- Traditional Vocational Assessment Services
- Testing and Evaluation
- Career Guidance/Job Preference/Market Analysis
- Medical and Psychological Services
- Career Development and Skills Acquisition
- Training and Education
- Employment
- Post Employment Follow-up and Evaluation

We have not included the details of these components because they are widely used in VR&E. However, the Task Force urges VR&E to create and implement the interventions that are necessary to help the veteran stay in school. We know from VA statistics that a large number of participants discontinue or interrupt their program, which means

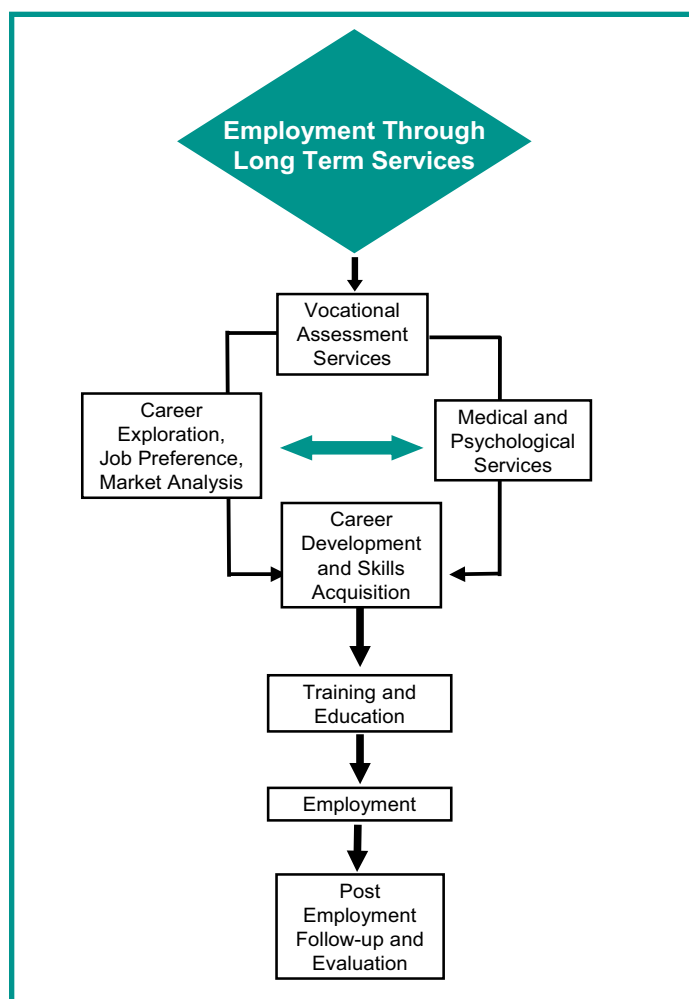


Exhibit 17

they never reach suitable employment as defined in their rehabilitation plan.

Track 5 - Independent Living Services

The term "independence in daily living" means the ability of a veteran with few supports, to live and function within the family and community. Independent Living services are critical to many veterans. These services can make the difference in disabled veterans' improving their quality of life and achieving their goals to the point that paid or volunteer employment is feasible, as new technologies and approaches become available.

It appears to the Task Force that Independent Living services are currently being used as an alternative to employment in some areas where there may be few employment opportunities, and/or where the barriers presented by the disability and the environment are "determined" by VA staff to

be too difficult to accommodate in a job situation. The Task Force noted that the single largest group of veterans for whom an employment plan is not considered feasible was for veterans with psychiatric disabilities.

The Task Force believes that the intent of the VR&E Service providing Independent Living services is an excellent one, but that the effort lacks sufficient direction, standards of practices, and protocols designed to quickly assist the veteran. The Task Force also believes that specially trained IL staff must be available, and that VR&E Independent Living services must be integrated with the VHA and the larger community-based independent living movement.

With the above reasons in mind it is clear to see that Independent Living services may be necessary in any/all of the Five-Track Employment Driven Model tracks. For example, a veteran may need Independent Living services while attending school or in training, or during the job search.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the delivery of Independent Living services has been inconsistent across VBA's Regional Offices. Individual VR&E Service offices have implemented their own approaches to Independent Living services without sufficient and tailored training of specialized staff. Many VR&E offices delivering Independent Living services emphasize only quality of life issues and personal goals, with little

attention paid to potential employment opportunities. The major components of an Independent Living Program are below, and the Task Force urges VR&E to develop a standardized delivery for these and other components that may be identified. Exhibit 18 is a graphic overview of this track.

The VBA Independent Living program must incorporate the expectation that all veterans have the potential for achieving suitable paid or voluntary employment,

regardless of the disability. Independent Living Services include the following components:

1. *Reevaluation of a Vocational Goal*

Based on the expectation that employment can be a goal for each veteran, this component requires a periodic vocational assessment. The assessment would be conducted in Track 4-Employment Through Long-term Services. If employment is feasible, the veteran will work in Track 4. If the veteran and VA conclude that employment is not an immediate goal, the veteran could be referred to both VA and non-VA community-based services. The assessment would be done every 6 months.

2. *Needs Assessment Services*

This component assesses the veteran's abilities, aptitudes, and interests to determine if a serious employment handicap exists.

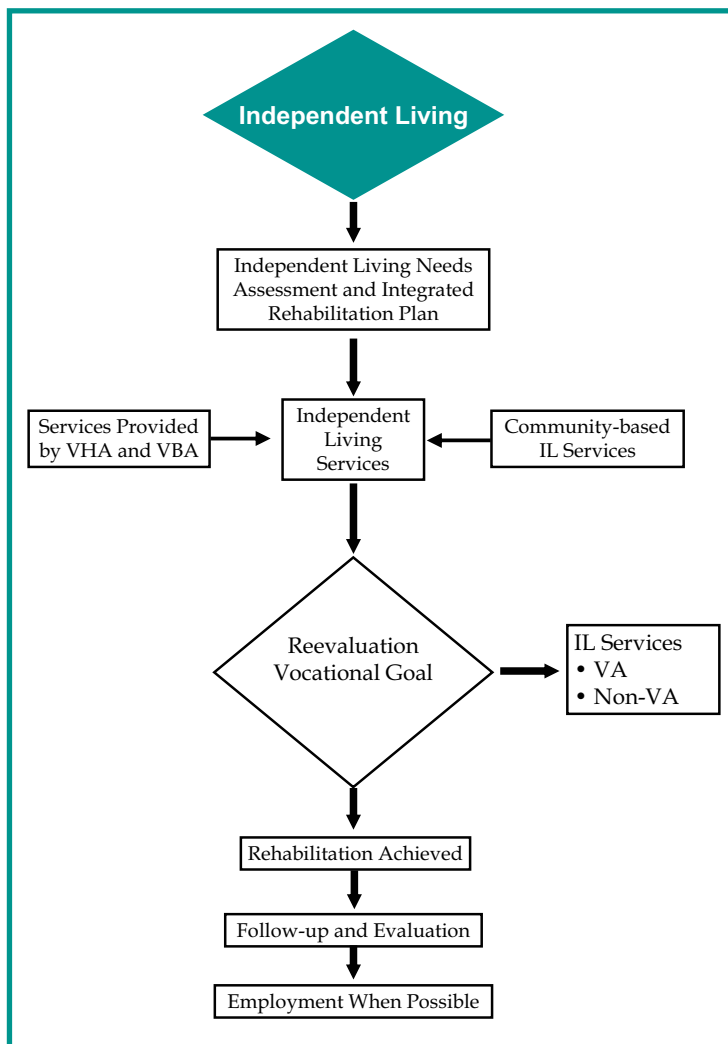


Exhibit 18

A quality evaluation interview which includes objective data from tests is necessary to develop an understanding of a person's pattern of abilities, aptitudes, and interests. An assessment will help determine whether the veteran is currently employable in suitable employment, and whether current or desired employment is consistent with a veteran's abilities and interests.

3. *Develop IL Plan*

The Independent Living Specialist develops, with the veteran, an IL Plan that identifies

the independent living goals based on the veteran's assessment and interests. VR&E will work with both VA and non-VA resources to define the appropriate types and scope of IL services. The plan may address the following:

- Needs Assessment
- Testing and Evaluation
- Core Services (resources, housing assistance, personal assistant, transportation, assistive technology)
- Independent Living Skills Training
- Medical and Psychological Services
- Peer Support Program
- Linkage to Community Services
- Employment Services When Appropriate

Characteristics of Independent Living Services – Track 5

The following are examples of characteristics and activities that an Independent Living Employment Track should have:

- Socialization skills such as reading, writing, or literacy assistance
- Decision making/life control skills
- Fitness/exercise/health maintenance
- Self-esteem needs
- Safety/self-defense needs
- Nutrition
- Health care needs provided by a VA Medical Center through coordination with the vocational rehabilitation counselor
- Housing referral and assistance
- Personal Care Attendant selection and management
- Identification and coordination of Family Adjustment counseling services
- Transportation
- Recreation
- Financial management
- Referral for Legal Issues/Legal assistance
- Benefits review and analysis
- Assistance with adjustment to disability and other personal adjustment
- Assistance with referrals for spiritual needs
- Evaluation of independent living needs as required by federal law
- Driver evaluation and training
- Assistive animals
- Assistive technology to help with speech, communications, mobility, etc.
- Adaptive equipment needed to participate in recreational and leisure activities
- Information on Independent Living services and referral for community-based services
- Continuing guidance and support
- Assistance in obtaining volunteer opportunities
- Assistance in obtaining prosthetics/orthotics equipment
- Modifications to improve access and eliminate barriers

Most importantly, it is crucial that veterans hospitalized in the VHA medical care system for SCI, TBI, and other catastrophic disabilities have better access to Independent Living services. These disabilities severely impinge on the veteran's ability to achieve the fullest community integration possible in housing, employment, and social and leisure activities. Improving access to Independent Living services for these individuals should be among the highest priorities for VR&E, and to do so, the partnership between VR&E and VHA must be strengthened.

Conclusion – The New Five-Track Employment Process

The new Five-Track Employment Process is the core of the VR&E integrated service delivery system. As noted in the description above, the five-track model is individualized for each veteran with a disability, and is not necessarily used sequentially. Because veterans have different needs at different points in their lives, the Task Force believes that options and choices must be available to meet these needs—as demonstrated by the five-tracks. The five-track process must be integrated in all the functions within the total VR&E employment-driven system; this will require a “rebuilding” of the VR&E system, not merely “tinkering around the edges.” The VR&E Service must serve ALL veterans, acknowledging the diversity of the veterans who are being served and the different needs that each one brings on his or her road to employment and self-sufficiency.

